Kenilworth, IL - Standing at the Lake Michigan shoreline this morning, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Highland Park) pointed to a proposed new sludge processing plant in his district that could send nearly 100 new pounds of mercury into Lake Michigan and announced he would introduce legislation aimed at ending all such new sources of mercury.

“Today, Lake Michigan is considered ‘impaired’ under the Clean Water Act because of mercury levels,” said Congressman Kirk. “Research has shown that 1/70 of a teaspoon of mercury can contaminate a 25-acre lake. A waste-treatment plant being considered in Waukegan could emit as much as 33 to 92 pounds of mercury into the air annually. Projects like these are proposed because they meet EPA standards. I believe there should be a law regulating what goes into Lake Michigan. As a legislator, I believe it’s time we address this important issue.”

According to a report issued on April 1, 2002, by the Environmental Protection Agency, the Great Lakes ecological condition is rated borderline poor overall. The EPA study said chemical contamination resulting in fish consumption advisories is one of the greatest environmental problems in the Great Lakes. According to the report, Lake Michigan fish were contaminated with PCBs, mercury and chlordane.

“Mercury is the most frequent basis for fish advisories,” Kirk said. “And mercury advisories are increasing faster than for any other pollutant. We must move quickly to protect the most vulnerable and sensitive populations to this toxin, including pregnant and nursing women, fetuses, women of childbearing age and children under 15 years of age.”

Mercury is a toxic metal and a natural element, commonly seen as a shiny, silver-white, odorless liquid metal. Like all elements, the same amount of mercury has existed on the planet since the Earth was formed. However, the amount of mercury mobilized and released into the environment has increased since the beginning of the industrial age.

Mercury moves through the environment as a result of both natural and human activities. The human activities most responsible for causing mercury to enter the environment are burning materials (such as batteries), fuels (such as coal) that contain mercury, and certain industrial processes which produce air pollution containing mercury.

Based on EPA's National Toxics Inventory, the highest emitters of mercury to the air include coal-burning plants, municipal waste combustors, medical waste incinerators and hazardous waste combustors. Mercury emissions from these and other sources are transported through the air and eventually deposited to water and land, where humans and wildlife are exposed.

In drafting the legislation, Kirk vowed to work with the Lake Michigan Federation, the oldest citizens' Great Lakes organization in North America, and the Sierra Club.

"When levels of a pollutant are too high, it makes no sense to allow more of that pollutant into the impaired water body," said Cameron Davis, executive director of the Federation. "We commend Congressman Kirk's common sense approach to protecting Lake Michigan and the health of those who rely on it for food, recreation, and a strong quality of life on the North Shore."

The Federation's pollution prevention coordinator and attorney, Laurel O'Sullivan, joined Congressman Kirk in discussing problems with Waukegan's North Shore Sanitary District proposal. O'Sullivan, an expert on mercury contamination and the NSSD proposal, presented testimony and comments against the new mercury source earlier this year.

Once mercury enters water, directly or through air deposition, it can bio-accumulate in fish and animal tissue in its most toxic form, methylmercury. When methylmercury is ingested into the human body, most of it is absorbed through the gastrointestinal tract into the bloodstream where it is rapidly carried to other parts of the body. It takes about 70 days for half of the mercury that has entered the body to be removed. The remaining mercury is slowly removed over several months, mainly in feces.

On April 7, 1997, the United States and Canada signed the Great Lakes Binational Toxics Strategy. While both countries have domestic strategies to reduce mercury pollution, a coordinated approach is necessary to bring the greatest reduction in toxic substances throughout the Great Lakes Basin. The strategy seeks a 50 percent reduction of the deliberate use of mercury and a 50 percent reduction in the release of mercury caused by human activity by 2006. The strategy applies to all sources of mercury emissions to the air nationwide as well as to all sources that directly discharge mercury to the water within the Great Lakes Basin.

In February of this year, President Bush unveiled The Clear Skies Initiative which calls for cutting mercury emissions by 69 percent, instituting a first-ever national cap on mercury emissions. The initiative will cut current emissions of 48 tons to a cap of 26 tons in 2010, and 15 tons in 2018.

“We must reduce the risk mercury poses to people’s health,” said Congressman Kirk. “The legislation I am proposing will put an end to new sources of mercury in the lake’s ecosystem and is consistent with achieving the standards outlined in the Great Lakes Binational Toxics Strategy. My legislation will also help us meet President Bush’s ambitious goal to reduce mercury under The Clear Skies Initiative.”